

INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE AND THE BIRTH OF INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL POLITICS

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Abstract: The 2003 UNESCO convention on intangible cultural heritage aimed to protect and to valorise traditional rituals and festivals, as well as other forms of folk culture. This paper focuses on the consequences of such a protection, suggesting that it is connected with a new scale of festival politics that develops at an international level. For this paper, the examination of some elements included in the intangible cultural heritage list (e.g. the Patum festival in Berga, Catalonia, the carnival in Binche, Belgium, and the processional giants and dragons in France) brings evidence about the new concerns currently appearing when the festivals come under UNESCO protection. The local impact of the intangible cultural heritage label is examined, as well as the international criteria elaborated to decide which festivals can ask for protection. The paper shows that the new UNESCO international festival politics is different from the previous generation local and/or national festival politics. Different case studies show that the new UNESCO international festival politics can sometimes benefit the local festivals by connecting them with the fields of tourism and economic development. However, institutional protection can also deeply alter the spontaneous aspects of the festivals, eliminating incorrect rituals and sometimes changing the local structure of the ritual year.

Keywords: festivals, rituals, politics, intangible cultural heritage, UNESCO

Introduction

In this paper I would like to study the consequences of the new protection and valorisation of traditional rituals and festivals as intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO. I suggest that the building up of local festivals as a global cultural resource can be understood as a politization process because it leads the different festivals to answer unified requirements and can therefore be interpreted as a means of institutionalising the festivals. The main problem which arises is that the institutional protection of the festivals may alter their spontaneity. But it is also possible to consider the question under the heading of professional ethics, when the researcher is called for expertise by the political system which fuels the UNESCO convention. In the first part of the paper, I examine the relations between research and politics and I stress the question of the researcher's involvement in heritage politics. In the next section, I present the 2003 UNESCO convention on intangible cultural heritage and the way it is implemented in different State-parties of the convention. I then insist on the double nature – at once technical and ideological – of the changes observed when a given festival enters the UNESCO

system. In the last section I try to understand heritageization as a politization process, listing the different criteria which change autonomous and spontaneous festivals into regulated and institutional cultural elements. The whole paper can eventually be understood as a critique of the heritage-building process in connection with the case of intangible cultural heritage, which can possibly be transferred to other categories of cultural heritage.

Research and/or Politics?

In order to work out the relations between festivals and politics, I would like to build my reflection on a double basis. First I would like to take the position of a researcher concerned with the evolution of local festivals in Europe and their political uses and misuses. Second I will present myself as an expert in the implementation of the category of intangible cultural heritage, since I was asked a few years ago by the French Ministry of Culture to write a report on the social impacts of this new category of cultural heritage.¹ As one can easily imagine, this position is a tricky one because on the one hand, as a researcher I feel I have the moral duty to remain neutral, independent from any political power, but on the other hand, as an expert I have to get involved in politics in a broad sense in order to give a diagnosis and to help institutional decisions to be taken.

Year after year, I have accordingly developed a very special sort of schizophrenia, which leads me to be at once outside and inside the facts I try to study. As a researcher and as an anthropologist I try to remain outside the world I'm studying, but as an expert I have to be an insider. But this sort of dilemma was already well-known in our predecessors' ethnography when they spoke about "participant observation"² or similar concepts. And I believe indeed that it is possible, and even sometimes productive, to combine the two perspectives, that is the "emic" and the "etic" perspective, when doing research in social sciences.

By combining these two perspectives, my position is rather pragmatic. In fact, I don't think it's even possible for the researcher to escape from the social world he's investigating, so I have decided it could be useful to use my participation as a method in my research. Of course, this position is often contested by those who fear that participation can weaken their scientific findings and their objectivity. Positivists and critical scientists always think that they should stand apart from their objects. Alternatively, I would suggest that there is a possibility to engage in politics while staying moral, if you manage to adapt your methods to the political context you're studying and if you don't get involved in too narrow party politics. In this respect, it is necessary to document very carefully the political system in which you are working and to systematically compare such documentation with the collected data itself. The analysis can then be built up by crossing

1 FOURNIER 2009.

2 MALINOWSKI 1922.

two different series: the one of the facts themselves, which have been observed through “thick and thin” ethnography,³ and the one of the political and social discourses concerning these same facts and enveloping them.

To make it clearer, it is better to present an historical example at this stage of the discussion. In France, a powerful book written by a cultural historian twenty years ago – *Le projet culturel de Vichy*, by Christian Faure⁴ – has shown how the government in occupied France, during World War II, made intense efforts to shape popular culture, folklore and festive rituals in order to take power over people and to break down the national movements of resistance against Nazism. The case has been well documented since then, showing how totalitarian regimes and nationalist parties were keen to instrumentalize folklore and festivals.⁵ Folklore historians have also shown how difficult it was for folklorists to decide what to do in such political contexts. Must they collaborate with the regime in order to soften the extremes in politics? Must they stop working and go on strike, taking the risk of letting others satisfy the regime’s ideals? Comparing different examples, it seems that there is no simple answer to such questions. In France, during World War II, some scholars retired from public life. Some of them took the opportunity to get some funding from the regime. Some others pretended they would work for the regime but used their work to protect some young resisters.

When I was a boy, the people from my grandparents’ generation had experienced this sort of situation and were still quite traumatized by it, discussing regularly the case of being involved or not in public life. However, the generations born after the fall of the Berlin wall in the age of globalization can hardly understand the profound meaning of such discussions, because the scale of national politics has often been replaced by an international one, as I will show later. What I would like to point out here is that the political instrumentalization of science in general and of folklore in particular has not the same meaning in a national context and in an international context. I would suggest that when you work in a national context the influence of politics is much stronger than when you work in an international context. This is not only due to the orientations of the different national politics, but also to the fact that, when you work at an international level, your ability to compare the different national situations is dramatically increased.

Two different statements stand out from these preliminary reflections: First, I would suggest that the existence of an international arena to discuss ethnography or folklore politics makes it simpler today to get involved in expertise at a national level. To put it in simpler words, I feel less vulnerable as a researcher when the national institutions for whom I’m working as an expert become indebted to a supranational institution like UNESCO. Because of this supranational frame, the different nation-states have less power and the expertise can

3 MARCUS 1998.

4 FAURE 1989.

5 OURITSKAÏA 2011, POVEDÁK 2012.

become a comparative one. In such a context the researcher can become an expert without being totally instrumentalized by the nation-state he's working for.

Second, I would suggest that considering festivals and folklore at an international level is interesting in itself, as it teaches a lot about what I'll call here the birth of international festival politics.

Two different questions are intertwined here. The first one concerns the relations between research and politics; the second one focuses more on the relations between festivals and politics.

I have already partly answered the first question, suggesting that the scales where the researcher works considerably influence his relation to politics. Here again I would suggest that the more the researcher works on a narrow scale, the more his research might be instrumentalized by politics. For instance, many of us have experienced how small museums or small town councils were keen to use our research in a politically biased way. On the contrary, having an international scope often prevents such instrumentalization. The difficulty is then to hold tight to the local data in order not to get drowned in too general considerations.

Concerning the second question, the 2003 UNESCO convention appears as a great example to assess the evolution of the relations between festivals and politics, and I would now like to concentrate on this point.

The 2003 UNESCO Convention

The 2003 UNESCO convention has as its purpose safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. It aims to ensure respect for the intangible cultural heritage of the communities concerned, to raise awareness of the importance of intangible cultural heritage, and to provide for international cooperation and assistance. For the purposes of this convention, according to the definition provided in its second article, intangible cultural heritage means "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and sometimes individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. The intangible cultural heritage is transmitted from generation to generation and 'constantly recreated'. It is manifested in five different domains: oral traditions and expressions; performing arts; social practices, rituals and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; traditional craftsmanship" (UNESCO Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2003, art. 2).

Out of this definition, the convention aims at the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission and revitalization of such heritage. A general assembly of State-parties was then constituted, as well as an intergovernmental committee, leading in ten years to the admission of about 250 cultural elements on the "representative list", 30 on the "urgent safeguard list", and 10 on the "best practices list". In each of the 151

countries which have ratified the convention, inventories are being carried out and periodic reports are written to organize the safeguard of this new category of cultural heritage. NGOs and scholars are asked for expertise and sit in national committees, and many communities have asked for the recognition of their own customs and practices.

In less than a decade, intangible cultural heritage has thus become a new paradigm through which everybody is invited to discuss ethnographic and folklore matters, and un-numerable conferences and meetings have been organized, either to criticize or to encourage this huge UNESCO initiative.

Once I have presented this new institutional programme, I would like to insist on some of its main features and on its consequences on the relations between festivals and politics in today's world. As you may have noticed, I have presented the UNESCO programme as an institutional initiative, which emphasizes the "top-down" dimension of the whole thing. However, the convention has also acted as an incentive for communities willing to safeguard their intangible cultural heritage, which led to a complementary "bottom-up" effect where more and more people try to have diverse cultural elements acknowledged by an inscription on one of the three lists. In the countries which have ratified the convention, this means intense lobbying to present the cultural elements as legitimate enough to be included on the list. In the countries which haven't ratified the convention yet, the efforts of the communities are sometimes directed towards this ratification. In Great Britain, for instance, where the convention hasn't been signed yet, Scotland has launched a general reflection on the cultural elements which could potentially ask for the UNESCO label.⁶ Such a reflection has a political significance in itself as it looks for the recognition of a Scottish national culture. But at the same time, communities wishing to get the UNESCO label ought not to appear as too nationalistic or too narrow-minded: this is why Scotland has included the Indian "Mela" festivals in Scotland, for instance, in the Scottish national heritage. In a similar way, the French government has sponsored some research on the rituals on the Italian French community in Paris for instance, in order to show that intangible cultural heritage was not only concerned with national identities.

Technical versus Ideological Matters

In fact, two different levels may be distinguished when speaking about the implementation of the convention: the technical one and the ideological one. These two levels form the new frame through which the relations between festivals and politics can be considered today.

On a technical ground, the implementation of the UNESCO convention raises several questions, the most important being the ability of the local communities to fulfil the different criteria to get the UNESCO label. Such criteria are complex.

6 McCLEERY et al. 2010.

The cultural elements have to be fully described and documented in a written dossier where the geographical location and the name of a contact person clearly appear. The description has to be developed enough to demonstrate that the element belongs to the community's intangible cultural heritage, that the community recognizes it as a part of their intangible cultural heritage, that it is being transmitted from generation to generation, that it provides the communities with "a sense of identity and continuity", and that it's not incompatible with the ideals of human rights, mutual respect and sustainable development. Summary descriptions concerning the elements themselves, their bearers and practitioners, their social meaning in the community have to be written down by the candidates or their representatives, who are also asked to demonstrate that they have already made some significant efforts to safeguard the elements and that they plan to make some more. Lastly, the candidates have to give some evidence concerning the community participation and consent in the nomination process, and make sure that the element is already included in a national inventory. After the files are completed, they are submitted to the national committees in charge of the implementation of the convention and, if approved, they are eventually transmitted to UNESCO to be included on the lists.

There have been a lot of discussions concerning these criteria and the ability of the communities to fill in the forms themselves. As one can imagine, although the matter discussed is "intangible" and broadly concerns culture and folklore, the dossier itself is rather heavy and tangible, and it is often quite difficult for the communities to write down such descriptions of their own cultural elements. In fact, the more the communities are in the peripheries, the more it will be difficult for them to get through this complex formal procedure. This appears to be a very strong bias, because the less powerful communities, especially in the countries from the South, will find it very hard to be candidates. This is paradoxical, when you think that the convention was especially set up to address the Southern countries which have less built heritage and therefore were unable to propose anything for the 1972 World Heritage List. In some cases, folklorists or anthropologists are called to the rescue by the communities to help them filling in the forms, which means that the cultural elements are always re-shaped during the process.

Here, the technical level is strongly connected with the ideological one, because the process of writing down the candidature files always supposes some sort of reinterpretation. In most of the cases, the communities try to erase the most spontaneous aspects of their culture. In the case of festivals, the excessive or the subversive parts of the celebrations are often forgotten when filling in the forms. Recently, the classified carnival of Alost, in Belgium, scandalized the UNESCO when a train wagon referring to the Jewish deportation by the Nazis was displayed to mock the present relations between the Wallon and the Dutch minorities in contemporary Belgium. In such cases, when the cultural elements show disrespect to a given community, the question is raised of their exclusion from the list.

In other cases, the intangible cultural heritage label is seen as a means to attract tourists and to give an impulse to local economic development. Although it is difficult to say how and up to what point the nominations really impact the economy, such an impact is often an important one at a symbolical level in the eyes of the local communities. In Berga, Catalonia⁷ and in Binche, Belgium,⁸ there have been strong debates to discuss whether the label could alter the spontaneity of the festivals. In Tarascon, in Provence, France, where the Tarasque dragon was classified in 2005, I have documented the creation of a new medieval festival using the traditional processional emblem in a totally new context.⁹ In this case, the local structure of the ritual year has been changed: in the traditional way there was a first festival in June featuring a furious dragon, and a religious celebration on July 29th featuring a smaller dragon, which had been tamed by Saint Martha according to some old medieval legends. But the religious celebration has disappeared and was replaced in recent years by a profane medieval living history festival featuring a third dragon at the end of August. The dragons are still there but their meaning has considerably changed: they now address the children and don't frighten the adults anymore. Moreover, the two dragons now have the same meaning, while the traditional ritual year was shaped by the succession of two different dragons: the furious one and the tamed one. In this case, the traditional meaning of the dragon was lost but the UNESCO label led to a renewal of the motif and its inclusion in a new ritual cycle.

Festivals and Politics

In order to summarize what I've said, I would like to eventually come back to the relation between festivals and politics, which appears to be a very complex one.

Here I shall suggest that the notion of intangible cultural heritage and the 2003 UNESCO convention represent the birth of international festival politics, because they create a new arena where festival matters can be discussed both by the researchers, the communities, and the political institutions. These new international politics use adapted instruments – the general assembly and committees, the lists, the different national commissions – to select specific cultural elements fit to represent a universal cultural heritage. As with any selection process, some of the existing festivals are elected and fall under UNESCO's spotlights while other festivals remain in the shadow. To answer the selective criteria of UNESCO, the communities develop strategies and adapt their festivals to the institution's standards. Intangible cultural heritage politics can therefore deeply influence the contents of the different festivals worldwide, which is at once a frightening and an exciting perspective for the researcher. On the one hand there

7 NOYES 2003.

8 TAUSCHEK 2010.

9 FOURNIER 2010.

is a risk of loosing the specificity and the spontaneity of the festivals when they want to adapt to the UNESCO requirements; on the other hand the new political arena into which the festivals enter boosts their creativity and makes them more dynamic and competitive.

If we accept that politics are originally connected with the idea of a social contract, in the perspective of the Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau¹⁰, then it is possible to analyse the contemporary heritageization of festivals as a politization process. In the traditional system, the festivals found their meanings in the beliefs of the communities who organized them. But in the new UNESCO system, they become determined by external institutions setting up specific international festival politics: they all meet the same standards and the same criteria. In this respect, the UNESCO convention on intangible cultural heritage acts as a new constitution for cultural elements, including festivals.

In order to understand better how politics come to festivals in this new UNESCO system, it is then interesting to look at the way intangible cultural heritage brings politics into the different festivals. I have listed ten different criteria that aid in understanding the politization of rituals and festivals when they get into the intangible cultural heritage system. First, there are new actors in this system: new specialists and experts, new technicians, new administrators and new speakers begin to speak about their festivals in the name of the actors. Instead of a direct democracy, the festivals enter a representative democracy. Second, there is a creation of an international arena with unified standards to define the new category of intangible cultural heritage. Third, there are new ethics, because all the cultural elements have to correspond to universal ideals and implicitly respond to political correctness. Fourth, there are new definitions and standards, new codes and criteria to access the new arena created by the UNESCO. Fifth, there are new instruments, as we have already noted. These instruments are the assembly, the committee, the different national commissions, the lists, etc. Sixth, there are new strategies to correspond to the UNESCO requirements. Like in any political system, the actors try to access the new elite. The competition and the selection between the different cultural elements act like an election in the traditional political system. Seventh, minorities and communities have a role to play there, as well as nations, lobbies and pressure groups. Eighth, the UNESCO system enforces the institutionalization of the festivals and raises questions concerning the relations between written versus oral rights, cultural property, and legal matters. Ninth, intangible cultural heritage is often seen as useful for economic growth and local development, because it is seen as a means to attract tourism, to boost employment in the heritage industry, etc., which makes it a powerful tool for public management in the eyes of the politicians. Tenth, accessing the intangible cultural heritage lists is comparable to becoming a citizen of a new State named UNESCO. In this new State the cultural elements are all equal because they have been unified through the same process and meet the same requirements.

¹⁰ ROUSSEAU 1762.

All the ten criteria listed here are part of the same global politization process: when entering the UNESCO system, the festivals become part of a global public and institutional discussion, instead of remaining only customary and local. Whereas the traditional festivals were usually defined through autonomy, spontaneity and customary right, the new intangible cultural heritage festivals are now caught up in a thick net of institutions, regulations and contracts. This institutionalization is clearly comparable with the birth of a new political system.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to address two different questions at once. The first one concerns the relation between the researcher and politics, and the second one deals with the relation between festivals and politics. The two questions are necessarily intertwined because the researchers are more and more frequently asked to act as experts for local, national or supranational political bodies and organisations and to participate in the public assessment of the different festivals they study. Concerning the first question, it is important to note that the existence of an international arena to discuss folklore and ritual matters often frees the researcher from the usual instrumentalization of his research by smaller scale politics. Concerning the second question however, it is impossible to ignore how the existence of the same international arena has deeply influenced the festivals, which from now on have to answer to a whole set of precise criteria if they want to be acknowledged, and may change and evolve accordingly. Addressing together these two questions helps to understand that the building up of an international festival politics, under the aegis of UNESCO, might be more rewarding for the researchers than for the actors of the festivals themselves.

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